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Notes for CPS/NA Working Paper on : 1989 commentary on "Coercive Diplomacy" in the Light of Vietnam

--Nearly twenty years ago, in the middle of the last, most violent decade of the thirty-year Indochina War, I wrote a paper for a discussion group of current and former officials on some relations between the origins of escalation in Vietnam five years earlier and US strategy in the Cuban Missile Crisis two years before that. Most of the members of the group, like myself, had been involved as officials or consultants in both those episodes.

Probably most of them, again like myself, had not at the time reflected on any particular relation between the two cases, which focussed on different part of the world and what seemed entirely different situations. I recall no reference at all, during the process of planning and carrying out escalation in Vietnam in 1964-65, to the earlier Cuban Missile Crisis or to any similarities in the strategies pursued.

But just a year before I wrote this paper, two books appearing in 1969 had raised the possibility that policy in the second case had been strongly influenced by the perceived success of a fundamentally similar policy in the first.

Notes:

--Brandon, asserts this; RFK describes CII strategy in terms strikingly like those used by advocates of VN strategy.

--Except for RFK and JFK, the cast of high-level officials is almost identical: LBJ, McG, McN, R, (Ball), Taylor (now Ambassador), (Nitze, peripherally; now JTM) (now, WPB, Wheeler, Westy), LeMay (no longer McCone: Raborn? Helms)

--The policies are similar, but with some strong difference; the second, starting in August 1964, carries out the violence only threatened in the first (though still limited--compared to JCS' recommendations--gradual, controlled from the top, primarily "communicative signals" (threats of greater violence to come, if no compliance).

--Is it possible the differences were ignored, in forming expectations of results? (In the second, the actual violence of the bombing may have worked against, even precluded, the successful coercion, the enemy backdown, that occurred in the first. This possibility seems not to have been envisioned, nor even recognized or understood as it was manifesting itself.

For one thing, the maintenance of the threat, as well as the actual bombing, indicated ambitious aims on the part of the US that made negotiations appear unpromising and premature to the Vietnamese, who wanted to legitimise--by negotiating--neither the practice, the threat, nor the ambitions. Nor did they want to

indicate eagerness or readiness to end the war short of achieving their minimal goals (these may really have been well short of the goals the US attributed to them; but they were still greater than the US was at all willing to concede.)

Nor were they willing to accept the subordinate status, the indignity, of negotiating under threat or illegitimate, one-sided attack. The latter policy, then, blocked the possibility even of talks: until April, 1968, when the DRV leaders concluded (correctly) that the US was about to end all attacks on the North, and (probably incorrectly) had modified its aims, giving up its ambitious goals.

--The discussion in the two conferences and the interviews--all summarized in the Blight book--scarcely mention Vietnam, or any other crises: this despite the overlap in the parties, and despite the evident advantages of inferring patterns by looking at more than one episode. One could not even infer from the JFK School material that the Vietnam War had occurred, that it had been escalated by the same set of officials just two years after the Cuban Crisis (and had been going on, at a lower level, during the Crisis itself).

--However, one comment by McNamara--almost the only time he has made any public comment whatever on Vietnam in the last 21 years--does confirm, for himself, the very relation posed by the Brandon and RFK books. Not only does he assert the similarity of the strategy he advocated and executed in the two episodes, but he implies that the second instance was a direct result of the first, a product of "learning." (Learning, i.e., not to adopt the less-controlled and restrained JCS approach.) But he does not comment on the difference in results.

Since he seems to be defending, not regretting, his unsuccessful second use of the approach, he presumably means to imply that the JCS approach in Vietnam was not necessary to success--that the JCS were wrong about this in Vietnam as they had been in Cuba, that contrary to their views the gradual approach could, might have succeeded in Vietnam as it did in Cuba--and, presumably, he still believes that the JCS approach would have led to even worse outcomes than his own approach.

-- The focus of the JFK School efforts seems to be learn lessons from the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, about what the real risks were in the crisis and how to reduce risks in the future. (The lesson Blight seems to be pushing is that: the risks--specifically, of loss of control--were significantly high, as of the onset of the crisis; but that the very nearness of catastrophe led to changes in attitudes of the leaders which kept the risks, from then on, very low and have made the risks lower, indeed, quite low, from then on (so much so that the very existence of something like the current level of nuclear weapons, which is the basis for the prudent attitudes at least since the crisis--have their successors all maintained the same attitudes? Or is a replay

needed to refresh the prudence of high officials?  
--may be optimal to keep the risks low.

--The way Blight (short for JFK School) seeks to do this is to discover the lessons that the officials think they themselves learned, along with data--from interviews--on their own expectations, motivations, values, fears, etc. at the time: so that we can better understand their behavior and their concerns then, better predict the behavior and concerns of others more or less like them in later episodes and the future, and perhaps shape the motivations and choices of future officials in a hopeful direction.

--But some of the purported "lessons" must be misremembered, or misdated; e.g., McNamara's Law, and his emphasis on avoiding crises rather than managing them. The first could not have resulted from Cuba II; and if it had (been available to McN from whatever source by 1963-64, he would seem to have been very unlikely to do what he did in Vietnam in 1964-66 at all, or at least with as much hopefulness as he did.

--On the contrary, his behavior in subsequent years suggests that he did learn lessons in Cuba, but that they were quite different from what he remembers regarding McNamara's Law: focussing rather on the success of his strategy in Cuba II, and the possibility of repeating this success with a (more-violent) variant in Vietnam; and perhaps, the lesson that the JCS and Acheson had been wrong in their pessimism about this approach in 1962, when they advocated, as in Vietnam after 1964, a more decisive military approach, and they might be wrong again.

--In 1964-spring, 1965, the remnants of the ExComm replayed what McNamara, and perhaps others, thought of as the same strategy of Cuba II; and the same people had done much the same as the Cuba II strategy the year earlier, in Berlin. (to avert a Soviet blockade; just as Ike had done much the same to beat a Chinese blockade of Quemoy in 1958, as HST had done to beat a Soviet blockade in 1948: carefully-controlled non-nuclear measures, with threats of escalation if necessary, including nuclear weapons).

--All this continuity of strategy contradicts the inference that significant learning, affecting high-level choices, took place during the intense phase of Cuba II. Such learning as took place may rather (at the end of the crisis, at least) have confirmed the tendency to choose this strategy, rather than either to change policy in a way that would avert having to choose in crises, or to favor a different strategy.

--(Learning might also, however, have strengthened a high-level civilian tendency to regard the initial threats and demonstrations as bluffs, preparing and intending to concede or fold if necessary; without, however, assuring that this would actually be the course of events, rather than escalation, if the initial efforts did fail. But even if this were the effect, in 1962, one could question that

it was effective in 1964, since the ExComm members did proceed to escalate violence in the face of failure rather than to modify aims downward or make concessions or withdraw, as they were urged to do by allies in 1963, 1964, and early 1965, even after the initial phases of Rolling Thunder, when those initial attacks had clearly failed to achieve short-run results).

--Such learning is inferred by Blight in the Cuban Crisis itself (whether or not it persisted afterwards, and especially, under LBJ: who appears, incidentally, in the Cuban transcripts as a relative dove; and even appears such in the records of Vietnam in 1964-65: though McG implies this might be deceptive, given his determination not to lose there). However, this too may be questioned; it may well be that JFK adopted this attitude as early as Oct 17-19, before the blockade had been implemented.

--The missing parts of the records, such as Nitze's notes and my interviews on Nitze and McNamara and Cline, throw a different light on their own subjective view of the problem, US security interests, and the relevant options: thus, on our understanding and evaluation of their choices and performance, and of what to expect of future officials.

Similarly, what the Pentagon Papers revealed was not so much what the USG did as indications of why officials thought they were doing it, what they planned and what they rejected and why (in many cases the Papers eliminated certain attractive, official explanations of these matters, without definitely resolving the question of motivation).

The Papers revealed real surprises about what officials did or did not expect or fear, their actual concerns, in a way that did permit tentative judgements of the reasonableness, morality, and priorities reflected in their choices, judgements of the officials themselves; it was just to avoid such judgments, which tended to be dismayingingly negative, that such data had been long and carefully concealed and lied about. The same is true of this exploration of official awareness in Cuba II.

--In both cases, learning by officials is revealed, or suggested; but in neither case was this learning clearly put to the purpose of reducing later violence or averting crises: on the contrary.

--(Note the apprehension of Huntington and Wohlstetter in June 1968 that the very effort to learn lessons might have the former effect--as Humphrey, too, feared in May 1968--of generating a determination to have "no more Vietnams" in terms of violent intervention. But an experience of failure in Vietnam may, after all, have had this effect--not on officials, but on others--more than the experience of success in Berlin and Cuba.

--Note that no one had anticipated the success that actually occurred in Cuba, so early in a coercive process and at such a low level of violence. Thus, it came unforeseen as either luck--a

100x1 shot, as Acheson saw it, based on Khrushchev's unforeseeable (?) failure of nerve, funk--or evidence of the unexpectedly powerful potential of the coercive approach, or as evidence of the possibility of a kind of grace, a magical result. The latter two could have led straight to a similar strategy in Vietnam, given the unpromising nature of the alternatives (and LBJ's determination not to lose, equivalent to JFK's decision on October 16 that he must act and that the missiles must go: that he could not be found to have been bluffing entirely in his warnings, just as LBJ could not be seen to back out of a "commitment" by "three Presidents" or to have handled it incompetently, indecisively, ineffectively (as Carter did with respect to the Shah, and Somoza).